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Talbott Questioned About Past Criticism of Israel

'I Had a Different Line of Work Then,' Ex-Journalist Tells Hearing on State Dept. Nomination

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"Welcome to the other side of the journalistic pen," said Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.) to an obviously uncomfortable Strobe Talbott, President Clinton's nominee to be deputy secretary of state, as lawmakers grilled him yesterday about some tough criticism of Israel in a few old columns he wrote for Time magazine.

Talbott was experiencing a Washington phenomenon familiar to many other nominees for high office: Having everything one has said or written that might seem remotely controversial hashed over and rehashed at a confirmation hearing.

Talbott parried the senators' questions by emphasizing that the most sensitive remarks were made long ago and suggesting that the passage of time had greatly improved his wisdom. "I have deviated," he avowed at one point, from core beliefs "in the heat of forensic and journalistic battle."

Talbott's explanations at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing left little doubt he will be readily confirmed. Last year, the committee strongly backed his nomination to be ambassador-at-large to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, and his service in that post won him wide praise on Capitol Hill.

"I fully savor the irony of the position I find myself in now as a former journalist being confronted on... fragments of my past writings," Talbott told

Biden. "I had a different line of work then. . . . It was my job and I carried it out with relish, to go in with my dukes up, into fights on various subjects."

Talbott was responding to lawmakers' concerns that a few of the hundreds of articles he wrote as correspondent, bureau chief and editor-at-large in 22 years at Time displayed undue hostility to Israel or observed that American Jewish organizations had extraordinary political influence. The concerns were first raised last week by the Zionist Organization of America and the National Jewish Coalition.

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin has since made clear that his government does not share such concerns and praised Talbott as "a very good man." Sens. Howard M. Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) and Russell Feingold (D-Wis.) warmly endorsed Talbott at the hearing and called the criticism unwarranted.

But other committee members, including Sens. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.) and Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), wanted to know if Talbott still believed Israel was "well on its way to becoming not just a dubious asset but an outright liability to American security interests"—as he wrote in a 1981 Time column. They also wondered if he was still in favor of "selective cutbacks in military aid" to influence Israeli behavior.

Talbott said "there was absolutely nothing invidious intended" in criticizing the policies of then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, whose policy of supporting the permanent absorption of the

West Bank and Gaza strip was unpopular in Washington. "I certainly don't feel the way, today, that I felt 13 years ago on this or many other subjects that we might discuss," he said. "I have always believed a strong Israel is in America's interest."

Questioned about a variety of current foreign policy issues, Talbott hewed closely to public statements by Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher in what aides described as a calculated effort to avoid making news. He begged off discussing U.S. policy toward Bosnia, saying that a European meeting of the North Atlantic Council would take up a series of new U.S. proposals today.

Talbott said Christopher had asked him to develop a comprehensive diplomatic approach toward Eastern European nations and former Soviet republics in his new role. He said he plans to remain chairman of an interagency policy steering group on the former Soviet Union, and that Clinton would nominate James Collins, now the coordinator for regional affairs, as the department's new ambassador-at-large.

Talbott also confirmed that the administration now regards its Partnership for Peace proposal for eventually expanding NATO to include Eastern Europe as a potential hedge against the failure of democratic reforms in Russia. His statement represented a modest shift from the administration's past emphasis on using the proposal to draw all former Soviet republics—including Russia—closer to NATO.